

The Storyteller.

CELIA'S FRIENDS.

'WELL, dear,' said Mrs. Dalmayne to her husband as he entered the breakfast room, 'as you were late, I took the opportunity of wading through my pile of letters, and I have found one from Celia which I scarcely know how to answer.'

'Another appeal for a starving family, I suppose,' said Colonel Dalmayne, 'but ring the bell for breakfast, my dear, for at present I am almost in a starving condition myself, and we will discuss the contents of Celia's letter whilst we minister to our own creature comforts.'

Mrs. Dalmayne, who was one of the best wives in the world, waited until she saw him doing full justice to the devilled kidneys before she again alluded to her sister's letter, which she then read as follows:

'Dearest Sister,—You are always so kind and ready to help me, that I am now going to ask your co-operation in a little plan I have formed to benefit some exceedingly nice people—a widow and her son. The former is elderly, but in every sense of the word she is a most worthy person.'

'Oh, Lulu dear,' interrupted the Colonel, 'I can quite picture her. If nothing else can be said of people they are called "worthy," or perhaps "amiable." However, I'm sure Celia means "worthy" as the very highest recommendation. But go on with letter, perhaps she has something more brilliant to say of the son.'

Mrs. Dalmayne resumed: 'The son, a young man about 28, is not in good health and has been recommended a change to sea air, which his mother is too poor to give him. In my wish to help them I first thought of offering to defray their expenses at some watering-place, but I feared to hurt Mrs. Bridgman's feelings, as I believe she is most sensitive. People who have seen better days are usually the proudest of the proud. I understand that Mr. Bridgman was a member of the Bar, and this son was to have been brought up to the same profession, only his delicacy prevented his having the necessary education. Another son is in the army somewhere abroad, and a third is an engineer; but I fear that neither of them is of much help to the poor widow. Now, Lulu dearest, I have thought this: Could you ask them to your place?'

'The maddest idea in the world,' exclaimed Colonel Dalmayne, rising from the breakfast table: 'Celia is always so Quixotic.'

The wife said nothing, but a troubled look passed over her face and she went on with the letter.

'They would not be much in your way, as mother and son would probably spend most of their time on the beach, and you have told me that you are not expecting visitors just now. Sydney might object perhaps, but you could coax him round I am sure.'

'Indeed,' exclaimed the Colonel sarcastically.

'Think what a good action you would be doing; perhaps saving a valuable life. Let me hear, dear, as soon as possible that you consent.'

The writer then went on to other topics, and Mrs. Dalmayne, putting the letter down with a sigh, said:

'Now, Sydney, how am I to answer this?'

'Oh!' he replied, 'it is all out of the question, of course; you know how wrapt up Celia is in her charitable mission, and how in her goodness she entirely loses sight of common sense. Far better to send her a substantial cheque for them; they could go where they liked, which probably they would prefer to visiting strangers.'

'But you know, dear,' objected Mrs. Dalmayne, 'Celia shrinks from offering them money, and she is so good I scarcely like to refuse to do what she has asked.'

'Ailey comes home to-morrow,' said the Colonel, 'and guests will, I think, be rather in the way.'

'Not if they are agreeable ones,' replied his wife; 'as the widow of a barrister Mrs. Bridgman must be a gentlewoman, and she may be a highly cultured one. I should imagine the young man to be very quiet and unobtrusive; probably devoted to reading, as invalids generally are, so if you give him the use of your library I dare say he will amuse himself very quietly then indoors. However, of course, my dear, we will not have them if you dislike the idea.'

This last sentence was a very masterly stroke on the part of Mrs. Dalmayne, and, as she knew, it would have a better effect on her husband than the 'coaxing him over' as suggested by her sister; so that after a few more pros and cons had been weighed on both sides she quietly laid down her oars, ending the argument with:

'I'll leave it entirely to you, dear.'

The Colonel at once agreed to have the barrister's relief and invalid son, and a letter went off that night to Celia inviting them down for a week or ten days, which visit, as Colonel and Mrs. Dalmayne agreed, could easily be lengthened if the newcomers proved to be all that 'fancy,' or rather Celia, 'had painted them,' and a week from that day was fixed for their arrival.

CHAPTER II.

The dressing-bell had just sounded the following Thursday at Dalmayne Lodge when the sound of wheels passing the drawing-room window announced the arrival of the two visitors.

'There they are!' cried Mrs. Dalmayne to her husband. 'I was afraid they wouldn't be in time for dinner. We can just see them and then get dressed.'

At that moment the door opened and the footman announced:

'Mr. and Mrs. Bridgman.'

The announced couple did not enter for a moment.

'Wait a minute, young man,' came a hoarse voice from the hall, 'I'm just taking off my bonnet.'

Colonel Dalmayne darted a look at his wife that said plainer than words: 'I told you so.'

Mrs. Dalmayne's look of discomfort was by no means lessened when Mrs. Bridgman waddled rather than walked into the room, and behind her trailed a long, thin creature, to whom she sharply said:

'Wipe your boots, 'Enery.'

And the man, turning round, humbly did as he was bid upon an ornamental drawing room mat. He was the very opposite to his mother in size, for whilst she was tall and pathetically thin she was short and vulgarly fat. She wore a black silk dress, with three narrow frills at the bottom of the skirt. Round her ample waist was wrapped a wide band worked with brilliant crimson flowers in an artistic design of the early part of the century. A heavily-beaded black velvet mantle completed her outfit. She was wiping her rubicund countenance with a large silk handkerchief as she came into the room, and immediately sank down into a very comfortable easy-chair, her son following her example. There was a kind of click, as if something had gone wrong with the springs, but Mrs. Bridgman continued mopping her forehead.

Colonel and Mrs. Dalmayne had risen to greet the new-comers, but being speechless with astonishment, Mrs. Bridgman was the first to break the silence.

'Good evening, ma'am,' she said nodding pleasantly; 'excuse me rising, but I'm hexausted with the eat. Good evening, sir. My son, 'Enery, ma'am.'

The young man rose and gave a stiff bow, and, sitting down, proceeded to draw off a pair of gloves which appeared glued to his hands. A silence of some minutes ensued, and then Mrs. Dalmayne, who felt that unless something were done an explosion would take place, said:

'I'm sure you must both be tired and will be glad to go to your rooms. Dinner will be ready very soon.'

She touched the bell, and giving orders that servants should attend them to their apartments, the two guests retired, Mrs. Bridgman making a profound curtsy worthy of the Court of Louis Quatorze.

Once more alone Colonel and Mrs. Dalmayne looked at each other for some moments in silence, which was broken by the Colonel bursting into a hearty laugh, in which, however, his wife failed to join. Tears of annoyance and mortification had sprung to her eyes, and it was with some difficulty that she succeeded in keeping them from falling.

'I must go to Ailey's room,' said she, 'and prepare her to meet our dreadful visitors. Her risible faculties are so easily excited, that I am sure she will find it hard work now, poor girl, to hide her merriment, sorry as she would be to appear unkind. Indeed, we must all make the best of it now they are here.'

'And not hurt their sensitive feelings,' added the Colonel ironically. 'But really, my dear, we must get rid of them as soon as possible.'

'Our visitors have arrived, dear,' said Mrs. Dalmayne, as she entered her daughter's room.

'Oh, yes, mother; what dreadful people they seem to be,' exclaimed Ailey. 'They were getting out of the carriage when I was coming in from the garden. How they were dressed! Surely they cannot be friends of Aunt Celia's.'

'At any rate she is interested in them,' said Mrs. Dalmayne, 'and as they are here, we must not notice their failings, but treat them with kindness. So suppose, dear,' she continued, 'you go when you are dressed to Mrs. Bridgman's room, and show her the way down.'

Mrs. Dalmayne was not a girl to refuse a request of her mother's, but she now seemed disinclined to further her this behest.

Half an hour after this conversation, Miss Dalmayne tapped lightly at Mrs. Bridgman's door, and in response to that lady's 'Come in,' entered the room.

'I have come to show you the way downstairs, if you are ready,' said she.

'Now, that is very kind of you, my dear,' answered Mrs. Bridgman, 'you seem a very nice young person; I suppose you're the lady's-maid, aren't you?'

'Not exactly,' replied Ailey, with a merry laugh, which she was very glad to have a legitimate excuse for indulging in, for Mrs. Bridgman had on a bright yellow muslin skirt, somewhat too short for her.

Her feet, which showed beneath it, were clad in white stockings and bronze morocco shoes, with wide black sandals crossed over, as may be seen in fashion-plates of sixty years ago. The skirt was surmounted by a green velvet bodice, plentifully besprinkled with bright-coloured sequins. It was trimmed with yellow satin ribbon to match the skirt, and fastened at the throat with a very large brooch, containing the portrait of an exceedingly stout and red-faced man—the defunct Bridgman. The lady's costume was completed by a scarlet osprey, fastened with a diamond buckle in her hair, and a pair of black lace mittens, which, being of fine texture, failed to conceal her coarse, red hands. She formed a striking contrast to the tall, elegant girl by her side, to whom, after applying a powder puff to her cheeks and nose, she expressed herself ready to accompany.

On opening the door they found 'Enery,' who had evidently been waiting outside to take refuge under his mother's wing, and the three went down into the drawing room together.

Henry's appearance demands a word. He was attired in a dress coat which had evidently been made for a man of much larger growth, and hung upon its present owner in a similar way to a scarecrow in a field. His shirt was nearly eclipsed by a voluminous sailor-knot tie of a sporting design, and his collar hardly escaped cutting his ears, which organs were almost as red as his hair. His cuffs nearly covered his hands, on which he had a pair of white kid gloves. Knickerbockers with thick stockings and lace boots completed his costume.

The time which elapsed before dinner was a most trying one to Mrs. Dalmayne and her daughter, especially to the latter, on account